

# Kunapipi

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Volume 23 | Issue 1

Article 7

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2001

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### Recommended Citation

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### Abstract

Between 1907 and the late 1950s a large number of colonial writers recorded a Rwandan form of 'high jumping' called gusimbuka-urukiramende. These representations appeared in a variety of texts including travelers' tales, anthropological research, missionary reports and track and field manuals. It was not a modern sport but was easily constructed as one — an 'imaginative sport'

(pace Said). Although gusimbuka was subject to a colonial gaze, such as gaze was far from monolithic. It consisted of a variety of rhetorics that were often ambivalent and which sometimes contradicted one another. It is the variety of, and the slippage within, the rhetorical modes used to describe gusimbuka that forms the subject of this essay.

JOHN BALE

# Imaginative Sports and African Athleticism: Colonial Representations of a Rwandan Corporeality

## INTRODUCTION

Between 1907 and the late 1950s a large number of colonial writers recorded a Rwandan form of 'high jumping' called *gusimbuka-urukiramende*. These representations appeared in a variety of texts including travelers' tales, anthropological research, missionary reports and track and field manuals. It was not a modern sport but was easily constructed as one — an 'imaginative sport' (*pace* Said). Although *gusimbuka* was subject to a colonial gaze, such a gaze was far from monolithic. It consisted of a variety of rhetorics that were often ambivalent and which sometimes contradicted one another. It is the variety of, and the slippage within, the rhetorical modes used to describe *gusimbuka* that forms the subject of this essay.

*Gusimbuka-urukiramende* was a form of high jumping that was not necessarily competitive. It lacked measured records in its pre-colonial form and measurements of performances were only retained during the colonial period, primarily by Europeans. Standardised equipment was not used and performances, therefore, lacked comparability. In other words, it was not sportised. Athletes performed on unprepared sites but made their jump from a raised mound or stone. They jumped feet first and landed on the same kind of surface as that from which they took off. The first Europeans to witness and record this Rwandan form of athleticism are thought to have been members of the Duke of Mecklenburg's expedition to central and east Africa (Mecklenburg). The Mecklenburg party also claimed the first photograph of this form of African corporeality, an image that has been widely reproduced and has come to assume iconographic status (Figure 1). Mecklenburg is the European figure on the right and the caption labels the athlete as 'a Tutsi'. This European naming of the young men who performed this event as Tutsi, rather than Hutu or Twa (the two other groups of people making up the Banyarwanda) was to continue for half-a-century. As an image of power (but whose power?), it is worthy of much more deconstruction than is possible here (see Bale). Fifty years after the Mecklenburg photograph was taken the basic form of *gusimbuka* had barely changed, as reflected in the photograph shown as Figure 2.



Figure 1. 'High jump by Tutsi (2.50 metres), Nyanza,' 1907  
(Source: Mecklenberg)

*Gusimbuka* seems to have been practiced in three contexts. The first was as a part of manly training (by groups of selected youths — *intore*) at the 'court' of the 'king' (*mwami*) or of chiefs. The *intore* were disbanded by the Belgian colonial administration in 1922 as the result of their growing discipline and thereafter *gusimbuka* was most widely performed at gatherings such as royal festivals and weddings. A third, less documented, context is thought to have been as a local form of popular recreation (Maquet). The *mwami* and the major chiefs of Rwanda



Figure 2. Demonstration of *gusimbuka-urukiramende* at Kigali, about 1958  
(Courtesy of Professor Joseph Ghesquiere)

were invariably members of the Tutsi elite. During the colonial period, the Tutsi represented about 12% of the Rwandan population (known as *Banyarwanda*), though there were considerable regional variations in the balance of population. The majority group or Hutu, were also recruited as *intore* but were rarely, if ever, associated with *gusimbuka* by European writers. In this sense, references to *gusimbuka* as a Tutsi body-culture served to assist the stereotyping of Tutsi as super athletes and Hutu, through omission, as ordinary by comparison. It could even be read as contributing to an ideology that instilled among the *Banyarwanda* a 'premise of inequality' (Maquet). The traditions of a half-century of Tutsi rule (under German, and then Belgian patronage) were collapsing as Hutu power and decolonisation were mooted in the 1940s and '50s. *Gusimbuka* had disappeared by the early 1960s as the monarchy was abolished and Hutu assumed power. This

brief introduction serves to outline the context for my examination of the contradictory textual constructions of *gusimbuka-urukiramende*.

A traditional way of representing Africa and the African was as 'other', as 'natural' and 'living in the past' (Gregory 1995a) African body culture has been typically represented as savage. For example, Rwandan dancing could be described as 'such a *riot of savage* rhythms, of *violent* colours, of *barbaric* motions, that we felt *wrenched* away from the present' (Gatti 1946, 169, my emphasis). Here the native body-culture was something to be seen, and confirmed the 'generalised codes constitutive of savagery' (Ryan 126). Such words — and such polarities — obscure the fact that African body-cultures, for example, were as complex and varied of those of the Occident (Ashcroft *et al* 127). But so too were the Occidental readings of them. As I shall show, while widely applied to much of Africa, modes of negation were often more difficult (though far from impossible) to apply to *gusimbuka* than to dancing and other 'primitive' body-cultural practices. Representational problems could result when Europeans encountered 'native' body-cultures that appeared to be similar to those of Europe. The problems may have been exacerbated if such body-cultures could, apparently, produce superior performances to those of the European, belying European expectations of racial superiority.

There was no single colonial gaze over the Rwandan corporeal landscape. David Spurr has suggested that twelve rhetorical modes ('basic tropes' or 'a kind of repertoire for colonial discourse') may be used in colonial textual discourse to describe non-Western people. In this essay I employ four of Spurr's modes: *surveillance*, *appropriation*, *idealisation*, and *negation*.<sup>1</sup> Each of these is applied to the representation of the physicality and athleticism of Rwandan men. The strength of Spurr's approach is its ability to show the process of essentialisation as much more than pejorative stereotyping. Instead, different rhetorics are seen to be juxtaposed. In this essay I want to concentrate on a number of written texts in order to illustrate how a Rwandan corporeality was constructed for, and communicated to, the European world. In addition, and specifically, I want to show how a Rwandan corporeal practice was transformed by a Western imagination into a familiar and reductive cultural form — 'the Tutsi high jump'. Spurr's basic question is one that asks how Western writers construct representations of the 'strange and (to the writer) often incomprehensible realities confronted in the non-Western world. What are the cultural, ideological or literary presuppositions upon which such a construct is based?' (Spurr 3). For convenience, the essay is organised in four sections, each focusing on the application of one of Spurr's rhetorical modes, though these should not be interpreted as mutually exclusive. Of the four categories on which I concentrate, *surveillance* merges with *classification*, *idealisation* merges with three other categories — *aestheticisation*, *naturalisation*, and *eroticism*; and *negation* merges with *debasement*.

**SURVEILLANCE: RHETORIC OF THE RECORD**

Visual observation is widely regarded as the essential starting point of the Western record of 'the African'. The commanding view of the coloniser provides the source of both information (and with it, authority) and aesthetic pleasure. The written and quantified record of the African body were essential parts of the modernist project of bringing order to Africa. The quantified record of *gusimbuka-urukiramende* was a form of surveillance. Through the use of accurate quantification and measurement, the European could codify differences in customs that would be represented as fixed and normalised.

Imperialism involved the quantitative measurement of the imperial realm — a means of recording that was frequently in collision with idealised or naturalised modes. The measuring of various parts of the African's body was widespread and led to the growth of the sub-discipline of anthropometry. The Rwandan 'high jump' performances were measured via a similar ideological lens. Providing that the height of the mound or stone forming the take off point could be deducted, measurement of the 'net height' jumped could be readily made. Mecklenburg recorded — allegedly with 'exact evidence' — the high jump at 2.50 metres with 'young boys' clearing 1.50 to 1.60 metres (qtd in Ndejuru 128). In the decades between 1910 and 1950 other visitors recorded a wide variety of measurements. At an event witnessed by William Roome six athletes were said to have beaten the 'world's record' of 6 feet 7 inches. Two of them 'must have cleared a height of eight feet', a measurement which Roome was 'careful to take clear above the stone from which they jumped' (Roome 1930, 103). Gatti claimed that he recorded one performance with particular accuracy, measuring the height 'exactly at 8 feet 3 1/8 inches from the ground' (Gatti 1946, 171). These performances were aided by a run-up to the point of take-off that also encouraged measurement. Its length was variously recorded at about 10 yards, 13 yards, 15 yards and 20 paces (Catlow 25; Birnbaum 307; Balfour 242; Roome 1930, 103).

The height of the mound or stone from which the athletes 'took-off' was likewise measured. For example, Mecklenburg claimed that the one he observed was about a foot in height (59); Gatti measured one at 2 1/8 inches —making his recorded jump 8 feet 1 inch (1946, 171) and Jokl provided a measurement of 3 feet 4 inches (1941, 147). The consistently reported notion that the jumpers could only achieve such heights with the help of the take-off mound suggests a lurking sense of negation and a refusal to unequivocally acknowledge Tutsi athleticism. When Jokl compared the African leap to the European jump, he estimated that the elevated take-off points gave the Tutsi jumpers an advantage of about 6 inches (Jokl 1941; 1964, 126). According to Smith, however, by taking a 'small anthill into account' a clearance of 7 feet 10 inches was reduced to one of 6 feet 4 inches (11). The concern that everything should be accurately measured reflected the European obsession for detail. Africanism can, therefore, be read as a 'discipline

of detail and, indeed, as a theory of detail' (Said qtd in Gregory 1995b, 458) Everything about *gusimbuka* would be fully visible to the reader.

Measurement was central to the European description of the non-European world. It reflected a European 'way of seeing' — authoritative, powerful and appropriative despite — or, perhaps, because of — its mathematical or quantitative representation in apparently neutral and value-free ('non-ideological') terms. Quantification and the record were part of the language of achievement sport which was imposed on the pre-sportised oral world of Rwanda *via* the lens of the achievement orientation of the Western sports enthusiast. It would remove the obfuscation of the written word. Even if those who took such measurements were not sports fans, the urge to measure and record was undeniable. The athletics statistics of the European were, like the map, an imperial technology of ordering which allowed a form of homogeneous recording to appropriate the African for the European realm. The Rwandan body was valued for ethnological and scientific advances: it was also valued for its athleticism and its potential Olympism. Its value was best estimated by measuring it (that is, its output) in terms of quantified records. In this way it could be located within the expanding empire of international achievement sport.

#### APPROPRIATION: CLAIMING BY NAMING

Colonial discourse implicitly claims the place surveyed for the coloniser. A basic feature of colonialist discourse was the 'transferability of empire's organising metaphors' (Boehmer 52). Like colonial landscapes, the African body was 'brought within the horizon of European intelligibility through the multiple practices of naming' (Gregory 1994, 171). The application of European terms to African body-culture revealed the problem of translating something from one culture to another. Rwanda was dispossessed of its indigenous corporeal culture, the possibility of an indigenous athleticism was effaced by the widespread application of terms like 'high jump', *hoogspringen*, *hochsprung* and *hauteur*. The term 'high jump' connoted competitive, modern sport. The French term makes 'height' rather than 'jump' explicit. Here were familiar words or terms of reference from sources of the colonial gaze and it is possible to view the Europeans in Rwanda as being confronted with nothing so much as an image of themselves (Boehmer 49). Naming had acted as norming (Berg and Kearns 99).

Exactly the same conclusions, of course, could be applied to the widespread use of the term 'sport' in relation to *gusimbuka*. 'Sport' could bring 'the African' and 'the European' together. The athletic prowess of the 'muscular Christian', Captain Geoffrey Holmes, (a British Military Cross recipient, member of the British Olympic team, captain of the army ice hockey team and later an ordained priest) was thought to constitute *a common bond* that in some way united the two worlds of British and Rwandan body-culture. Somehow this bond of itself, 'enabled him, in such a large measure, to win the friendship of the *sport loving* Batusi'



(Roome 1931, my emphasis). 'Sport' in the 1920s was an extremely slippery term, continuing to carry some of its nineteenth-century disportive connotations and being applied to many disparate activities, ranging from elephant-shooting to cricket and from pig-sticking to high jumping. For most European observers, the Rwandan version of high jumping was unquestionably a 'sport' — and one in the achievement-oriented, Olympian mold. An introductory textbook from the mid-1920s generalised 'the Tutsi' — but not, notice, Rwandans — as practicing sports '*avec ardeur*' (Michiels and Laude 64). It was confidently described as the 'favourite sport' in Rwanda (Roome 1931, 134). If it was a sport it would also need to have its 'champions'. This title was applied by William Roome to Kanyamuhunga — 'the champion jumper of Ruanda' (Roome 1930, 102) and Stanley Smith added in parentheses, 'possibly the world' (11). The naming of an individual jumper opposed a totally dispassionate and scientific view. Usually, European representations of the indigene resulted in a reductive construction of colonial subjectivity — a 'type' such as 'native', Tutsi or 'savage'. The use of the man's name accepted 'the necessary cultural and personal individuation that selfhood generally presumes' (Gilbert and Tompkins 165). With 'sport' also came the 'record'. Mecklenburg found it necessary to add a footnote comparing the Tutsi performance of 2.50 metres with the existing 'American world record' of 1.94 metres (59). Rwandan performances only meant anything when compared with the records of the West — a comparison that was itself an appropriation. Europeans saw the natural (including human) resources of colonised lands as rightfully belonging to 'civilisation' and 'mankind' rather than to the indigenous peoples. The notion of Africa as the coloniser's inheritance is reflected in the way in which African culture was recorded and perceived. The European view looked forward in time as well as out in space. In the case of *gusimbuka-urukiramende*, the texts of those who witnessed it transformed the African landscape into familiar cultural terrain. Hence, whereas Stanley's gaze had constructed the English country village out of the East African landscape (Pratt), those who viewed *gusimbuka* had constructed an imaginative sports landscape made up of the Olympic Games, champions and world's records.

Frequent allusions were made to the Olympics. Patrick Balfour reckoned that 'they could walk off with the high jump contests at the Olympic Games' (241) while Ellen Gatti hoped that 'some enterprising entrepreneur will bring a bunch of these lads' to the same Games (79). The possibility of witnessing Tutsi athletes competing against the 1948 Olympic 100 metres champion from the United States, the sprint-hurdler Harrison Dillard was also welcomed (Akeley 59). And although Rwandan women did not take part in *gusimbuka*, Jokl saw them as possessing even greater Olympic potential than the men (1964, 26). Jokl was a consistent supporter of the sportisation of *gusimbuka*. He recalled that in 1950 he 'suggested to Dr Ralph Bunche, then in charge of the UN Trusteeship Council in New York, that a modern system of Physical Education and coaching be introduced to Rwanda

and that an effort be made to enter a Watusi team' (not, notice again, a team from Rwanda) in the Olympic Games (1964, 126–27).

Representing *gusimbuka* as a version of something that was already known — the repetition-across-difference as Boehmer (55) puts it — would be seen by Said as a way of controlling the threat that it represented (59), in this case a threat to the established view of the world sporting order. But with the Rwandan high jumpers the threat was seemingly impossible to avoid. It was the mis-perceived congruence of *gusimbuka-urukiramende* with the sportised high jump that led a prominent German physician to ask: 'What, then, will be left of our world records?' (qtd in Hoberman 1992, 46). The 'high jumpers' of Rwanda were seen as ideal bodies awaiting the body management of Western sport and, given their skills at high jumping, it was automatically assumed that European sports — and by implication, the universal space of Olympism — could be easily introduced into the region (Bernatzik 896). Olympism would lead to refined performance. Hence, despite the fact that the Europeans saw the Tutsi as superior high jumpers, it is implied that they could be further improved within the global sports system. Roome noted that if they were trained in the European manner they would 'jump equally well' without the aid of the raised take-off (1930, 103), a case of the seamless conversion of indigene to athlete. Like African 'art', *gusimbuka* reflected simply a 'stage' in the 'development' towards a 'civilised' body-culture (Ashcroft *et al* 158). The way in which it was read also presumed the continuing vitality of Tutsi society and its corporeality. Drawing on observations on African art, such writing 'rewards Africa for conforming to a European image of [athletics], for acting as a mirror in which the European can contemplate a European idea of [sport]' (Miller 290). *Gusimbuka* could not be seen as another, different kind of body-culture. Appropriating *gusimbuka* for the achievement orientation of the Olympic arena was arguably carried furthest by Jokl who argued that 'the Tutsi' were already modern athletes, having 'used the modern technique of high jumping long before Western athletes "discovered" it' (1964, 126). The European witnesses of the 'Tutsi high jump' found in the Africans' corporeality the possibility of bridging the gap between the African past and the global present. While in many situations the differences between the African and the Occidental were vast, European observers viewed *gusimbuka* as a kind of 'meeting ground'. The statistics were the sporting equivalent of a universal currency'. It could be argued, therefore, that to some extent 'the other was the same [but] all the more unsettling for that' (Kearns 452).

The male European gaze had prepared the bodies of Rwandans (written as 'the Tutsi') for entry into the spaces of Western sport. Such a world could be read as 'liminal' in character — 'a topsy-turvy reflection of home, in which constructions of home and away are temporarily disrupted before being reinscribed or reordered, in either case reconstituted' (Phillips 13). The fantasies that projected the Tutsi on to the global sports stage suggest how occidental writing tried to

minimise cultural differences through the unifying power of Western cultural institutions such as the Olympic Games and the sports record. The limited compass and the narrowness of vision of the Europeans' conceptual framework was exposed in their misconceptions, and in the poverty of their vocabulary and imagery which led them to see 'Tutsi high jumpers' as potential world record breakers or Olympic athletes. To an extent, metaphors like 'Olympics', 'record' and 'sport', as applied to *gusimbuka*, can be described as 'big' metaphors. Unlike the 'small' variety — which 'pepper individual sentences and that contribute to writing style' — they are the metaphors of appropriation; they shape the way we think about things (Barnes 149). In this case they shape the way we think what 'sport' is.

I must stress that the big metaphors noted above were not entirely contested. Some European explorers seemed to be less uncertain (or less rash) about the semantic ordering or location of *gusimbuka* and alternative signifiers were, on rare occasions, used in its representation. For example, it was described as a 'traditional Watusi art' (Meeker 151) but much more interesting, I think, is the inclusion of the word *springkünstler* ('spring artist') in the title of a paper on Tutsi athleticism published in 1929 (Kna). Whereas the term 'high jump' blurred the distinction between 'home' and 'away', these 'non-sportised' representations signify something quite different. The jumper as artist rather than athlete immediately connotes a performance rather than a result, a participant rather than a winner, an entertainer rather than an athlete, sensuousness not seriousness. 'Springkünstler' explicitly acknowledges artistry rather than sport and athleticism. It fits much better into the world of entertainment and display that seems to have formed the context in which *gusimbuka* was most often represented; that is, in its festive rather than its military form. But the application of the term 'spring-artistry' was never widely adopted, despite the fact that it was arguably much more suitable.<sup>2</sup>

But it was the term 'high jump' that (while correctly describing what was happening) appropriated *gusimbuka-urukiramende* through its Olympian connotations. In other words (literally), by looking to the world of sport for language to describe what was being observed there is the danger of falling into a trap of simple appearances. *Gusimbuka* became 'high jumping' — a body-culture for Europe. The application of the word 'high jump' brought the Tutsi closer to the European — an example of '*logos over mythos*, of writing over oral culture' (Gregory 1994, 173n). At the same time the Western view exemplified a paradox of colonial discourse with appropriation lying alongside other traditional tropes, that is the debasement and negation of the African, as part of the desire to stress racial difference.

#### IDEALISATION: NOBLE ATHLETES

A common tendency among nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Euro-Americans was to deny African body-culture and to see 'the African' as nothing more than a savage. J.A. Mangan observed that the 'overestimation of Western

tradition resulted in underestimation of indigenous customs' (1). The rhetoric used to describe *intore* dancing, noted earlier, illustrates this. But I think Mangan overestimates the extent of the Western devaluation of the African. One need only read the extravagant language used to describe the grace of the Tutsi high jumpers to see that this was the case. To be sure, it was possible to negate (even) Tutsi athletic performances (as I will show later) but it seems that the ambivalence of colonial discourse is reflected in a frequent willingness to describe the physicality of the African in highly idealised terms. After all, the high jump performance witnessed by Mecklenburg was something that the Occident had yet to achieve. So while cultural difference could be claimed for the 'Tutsi high jumper', cultural retardation and physical inferiority were less easily adduced and the 'natural' categories of 'Europe' and 'Africa' became blurred. Here the African performed better than the European at something the Europeans perceived as their own. The Tutsi were also seen as having crossed an unmarked boundary, transgressing the 'sport-space' of the white American and European.

Mecklenburg described the jumping as 'noteworthy', 'remarkable' and 'wonderful'. The athletes had 'slender, splendid figures'; the jump of 2.50 metres was 'incredible' (Mecklenburg 59–60). Gatti noted that 'we saw *slim* figures take a few *easy* steps, *effortlessly* abandon the ground and ... *soar* high over a thin reed, descending in *graceful* curves, landing *lightly*, *composedly*' (1946, 170 my emphasis). These effortless jumps were seen to have been made by natural athletes; 'the Tutsi' were a 'race of natural athletes' which meant that without training they could clear their own heights (Bernatzik 896). This was not the lazy, 'psychobiologically disadvantaged' native of the environmental determinist's Africa (Livingstone 221–31). Far from it: presented here are images of the naturalised and idealised African — physically perfect, naturally gifted, graceful, and able to outperform the best the Occident could offer. Yet the philosophy that explained the slothfulness of the native African — that of environmental determinism — was also used, in large part, to explain how nature had endowed 'the Tutsi' (but seemingly not 'the Hutu') with natural athletic prowess. Kna noted that young cattle herders learned early in life to quickly, and effortlessly, climb steep slopes. It was the nature of the terrain and topography which was the principal factor contributing to their musculature and their resulting high jumping abilities. Mecklenburg observed likewise, stating that the leg muscles and sinews of the mountain dwellers were far better developed than those of people of the plains (qtd in Kna, 460). The Tutsi could 'naturally' jump 2.50 metres at a time when the European view of the 'world record' was only 1.97 metres. Jokl observed that,

these primitive people carry out a technically complicated athletic movement which modern athletes can only learn to perform gradually during a prolonged and scientifically supervised period of training. The Watussis, on the other hand seem to conceive the control of the movement patterns underlying advanced high jumping rather complexly. They apparently have found an *autodidactic short cut* which enables

them to acquire mastery of the jumping technique without taking recourse to the analytical process of learning which we have to go through in our athletic training.  
(1941, 146)

Tutsi athletes were also seen as being what Western athletes could have been, had they not fallen into an implied state of physical degeneracy. They were not only different from the Western athletes but, having failed to be overtaken by the machine age, they were also better athletes. This could be seen as an example of 'healthy primitivity in the application of what was deemed to be a simple pastoral culture ... [and] the natural masculine outdoor life of sport' (Low 30). In Rwanda the healthy primitivism of the Tutsi could be viewed as embodying imperial dreams, perhaps even impulses for Western regeneration (Boehmer 127). The British track and field coach, F.A.M. Webster reflected such atavistic tendencies. He referred to 'a tribe in the far interior who had been said to be capable of clearing over 7 ft', adding that the 'efficiency of these native high jumpers probably owes much to the fact that nature and natural environment, without the cramping and distorting engines of civilisation in the shape of ill-made and badly fitting footwear, have allowed the feet to full play for development and growth, so that flexibility and spring have been retained unimpaired' (Webster 184). It was more than simply sympathy for black African culture when he added that 'what black men are doing today I suppose our own white ancestors were able to achieve when they too enjoyed the freedom of savagery' (Webster 184). Like some of the other bourgeois males who travelled to Africa, Webster seems to have been disenchanted with a rational social order and the urban and overdeveloped culture of the machine. His final words appear to be seeking a re-making of the 'natural body', innocent and pre-modern, following its cultural depletion. For some, the apparent subordination of the competitive spirit that was observed in *gusimbuka* provided a hint of a kind of primitive communism. For example, in the case of *gusimbuka* 'rivalry has its well-defined limits' and jumping stopped when the athletes felt tired, 'leaving the field with their arms around each others necks' (Severn 195–96). These were early-twentieth-century views that ultimately saw the need for bodily re-creation as much as, if not more than, recreation (Seltzer 56).

#### NEGATION: CHAMPIONS DENIED

The rhetorical mode of negation might be regarded as the most common form of representing Africa and 'the African' from the eighteenth century onward. Africa is seen, for example, as an empty space waiting to be appropriated and then filled or 'developed'. Negation is often allied to the rhetorical mode of debasement (and denial). It is possible to negate African corporeality by defining it out of existence or re-writing history. Negation is the negative stereotype at the polar opposite of the positive that is found (though with equivocation) in rhetorical modes such as idealisation and naturalisation. 'African' corporealities, like other

aspects of their non-Western otherness, were paradoxically 'ridiculed for their attempt to imitate the forms of the West' (Spurr 84).

The most negative form of recording *gusimbuka-urukiramende* is to deny it. That there was no sport at all in pre-colonial Africa often ran parallel to the view, noted earlier, that 'the African' was a *natural* sportsman (the gendered noun is deliberate). This contradiction can be explained by Spurr's observations that 'the concept of *nature* must be available as a term that shifts in meaning, for example, by idealising or degrading the savage, according [sic] as the need arises at different moments in the colonial situation' (Spurr 168). The contradiction also arose because the fluidity of the word 'sport' encouraged both alterity and mimesis. On the one hand it could be applied to events of the modern global sports system which, when seemingly absent from the African context (via the rhetorical mode of negation), could be used to maximise the cultural distance between the African and the European. On the other hand, when physical form was divorced from social function, the visible similarities of indigenous body-cultural practices with those of Europe could be used to exemplify the Rousseauvian view of the 'noble savage' and the appropriation of the 'natural athlete' for the sportised European realm. Yet the 'natural' could also read negatively. Combined with the imagery of the 'giant' — the title of one of Gatti's papers was 'The Jumping Giants of Rwanda' — a freakish quality could be attributed to Tutsi. Such freakishness moderated the idealised view that was also painted of him and rendered his apparently outstanding athletic performances less significant. His supposed natural ability could also be read as giving him an unfair advantage over the European.

Negation is illustrated in the writing of Karl Reutler who, in 1940, claimed that the Duke of Mecklenburg himself denied that *gusimbuka* was an indigenous body-culture. Reutler claimed that in an interview:

The Duke clearly stated that the Tutsi have only done this high jumping once — to be precise, on the day of the Duke's visit — and as a result of his proposal. The Duke emphasised that the Tutsi had never before, and probably never since, done the high jump ('*Die Watussi haben niemals vorher und wohl auch niemals mehr später den Hochsprung gemacht*').... In summary, the Tutsi high jump was a *unique European experiment* ('... *ein einmaliger Versuch von Europäern*'). The assertion of Professor Weule, that the high jump is the main sport of the Tutsi, is a mistake and basically false. The high jump had nothing to do with their economic and racial characteristics, it has not developed, it did not remain with them, nor has it been adapted to their way of life nor been adopted. (Reutler 51–52)

Mecklenburg had claimed *gusimbuka* as a Tutsi (yet again, I stress, not as a Rwandan) tradition in 1928 (qtd in Kna, 459) but its negation by Reutler's would be fully consistent with the prevailing Nazi body-cultural ideology. The academic conventions of a racist state in which the selection of scholars had become Aryanised (Jews being ineligible for university posts from 1933) seriously influenced aspects of representation. In situations where it was undeniable that

Africans could defeat 'Aryans' they were simply read as being nearer to animals than to athletes. This was part of a 'total' theory within which a wide range of attributes formed the basis for the categorisation of people in macro-groups (for example, 'Negroes') (Hoberman 1984, 164–65).

The juxtaposing of the modes of negation and appropriation is exemplified in a more recent example of the denigration of Rwandan jumping achievements. Rummelt obtained 'scientific evidence' which, he claimed, showed that if factors such as the uneven surface of the ground and the take-off mound were taken into account, the laws of mathematics and physics would predict that Rwandan performances would have been modest by Western standards (91). By employing scientific advice and simple mathematical calculations, he was able to conclude that the 2.50 metre jump claimed by Mecklenburg could be converted from one culture to another and become the equivalent of a modern high jump performance of between 1.87 and 1.89 metres. My interest here is not the accuracy of his claims but with the fact that he had first to appropriate *gusimbuka* in order to compare it with the Western model, before being able to negate it as a *Hochsprunglegende* (high-jump legend) (Rummelt 91).

Absence, denial and legends: these rhetorics exemplify the mode of negation, a mode that privileged European athletic prowess over that of 'the African'. The Rwandan high jumpers were projected as fantastical, freakish or, having been scrutinised by Western objectivity, simply not as good as first impressions may have suggested. Negation and naturalisation combined to prepare the way for the excesses of the European sports model. On the one hand 'sport' did not exist and an empty Africa awaited colonisation by Western athleticism; but on the other the 'natural athletes' were available to be processed for the anticipated world of achievement sports.

## CONCLUSION

This essay has considered the various modes of colonial rhetoric that were applied to an African body-culture and communicated to a European public. Such imagined 'sports', like Said's 'imaginative geographies' of Empire, were 'verbal acts' (Olsson 12). The rhetorical modes selected to structure the essay show that the European projection of African corporeality in the early twentieth century was far from one of negation, a mode that is frequently associated with much colonial writing. The continent was not always seen as 'empty' or as 'nothingness'. Here were found natural athletes and superhumans whose physicality exposed the white man as feeble by comparison. However, colonial rhetorics conflicted with one another. The juxtaposition of the quantified record of *gusimbuka* with the idealised naturalisation of the Tutsi athletes demonstrated vividly that in travel writing 'science and sentiment code[d] the imperial frontier in the two externally clashing and complementary languages of bourgeois subjectivity' (Pratt 39). This essay also shows how colonial discourse about Africa was not only a 'European

discourse about non-European worlds' (Pratt 34–35) but also included a sportised discourse about non-sportised worlds. Those who read Tutsi as future Olympians failed to see the significance of almost everything except sports. Such a view ignored history, anthropology, linguistics and politics, and, I should stress, it was almost always the Tutsi who were rhetorically privileged as athletes. How could the writers of the aforementioned texts have been so sure that there were no Hutu among them?

The main aim of this essay has been to explore the messy discourse of an African athleticism. But if politics underlie the textual images of *gusimbuka-urukiramende*, it is possible to privilege the mode of idealisation for it can surely be conceived as part (albeit a small part) of a European complicity in the construction of 'Tutsi-ness', something that has been seen as being far from unrelated to the Tutsi genocide. Some observers aver that 'racist prejudice was a structural feature of Rwandan society' (Uvin 91) and it is claimed that 'Rwanda is unique in the sheer abundance of traditions purporting to show the superiority of the Tutsi over the other castes [sic]' (Lemarchand 34). Hutu, while numerically outnumbering Tutsi and Twa, were negated in Tutsi and European representations and, especially during the period of Belgian colonisation, were crudely described in numerous writings as 'races' (see, for example, Gatti 164). I suggest that the positive stereotyping of the Tutsi, through his apparent athletic prowess, can clearly be seen as a display of 'racial' superiority. Devoid of any military overtones and replacing power with grace, what better symbol of 'racial' authority could there be than that of 'the Tutsi high jumper'?

From the perspective of modern sports, the imaginary Olympians of Rwanda never corresponded to the pictures that the Europeans had painted of them. Jokl's certainty that 'the Tutsi' were 'bound to play an increasingly important role in the Olympic Games in the future' was never reflected in actuality (1964, 70). The 'high jumpers' of Rwanda never competed in the Olympic Games. Nor did they break the official world's record of the Western sports system. Instead, their records remained as inscriptions in colonialist writing and photography — testaments to a European culture which was able to enculturate the Tutsi only as a way of seeing.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Spurr's twelve rhetorical modes are: surveillance, appropriation, aestheticisation, classification, debasement, negation, affirmation, idealisation, insubstantialisation, naturalisation, eroticisation, and resistance.
- <sup>2</sup> *Banyarwanda* did not read *gusimbuka* as a Western sport (how could they?). It contained none of the characteristics of Western sports: record-seeking standardisation, bureaucratisation, equality of opportunity and quantification (Guttman 1978).



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